HYBRIDIZING HIBISCUS - C. A. Bass

There is still much to learn about growing and hybridizing hibiscus. Perhaps we will never have the answers to all the problems that arise in the growing of this lovely shrub, so we will have to use the very best information that we have at hand.

Our first hibiscus seed were brought from Hawaii in 1908 by Mr. E. N. Reasoner of Royal Palm Nurseries of Oneca, Florida. He planted the seed and selected about 200 plants. Of these 200 he selected sixteen he thought were good enough to name and propagate. We now have many hundreds of named varieties. In recent years many good varieties have been brought in from Jamaica and other parts of the tropical world. But by far the greater part of these imports have been from Hawaii. I think that the hybridizers have done a good job for all of the beautiful hibiscus that you see were at one time seedlings.

In October 1960 I helped Douglas Knapp prepare a paper for presentation on "The City Farmer" program on television. It was presented in the form of questions and answers. It is based on information that I have gained through experience with hibiscus since I first became interested in them in 1946.

Q. How do you cross hibiscus to make new varieties?

A. Choose two plants that you think will produce a good bloom and bush. One to bear the seed pod and the other to furnish the pollen. Dust the pollen on the stigma pad of the flower that is to bear the seed pod.

Q. How long is it after a cross is made before you can tell if a seed pod will form?

A. In 10 to 12 days after a cross is made you can see that the seed pod is swelling if the cross was a success. It takes from six to eight weeks for the seeds to completely mature. Since the hibiscus belongs to the okra family the seed will be small and black and in fact look very much like okra seed. From four to twenty seeds may form. (Cont'd on next page)

Q. Explain how you plant the seeds.

A. It is best to plant the seed within a few days after they mature. Choose your planter according to the number of seeds you have to plant. Mix about half sand and half peat moss. Screen it carefully so there will be no lumps. Plant seed about 1/8" deep. Keep soil moist but not wet.

Q. How long does it take for the seed to come up?

A. It takes from three to six weeks for the seed to come up. While the seeds are sprouting it is well to place them in half shade for the little seedlings are very tender and will burn easily.

Q. When should the little seedlings be transplanted?

A. When the seedlings are 3 to 4 inches tall - they will be 2 or 3 months old - they will be ready to be placed in separate containers. Nip the top out when transplanting so that branches will form.

Q. How long is it before you can expect a bloom?

A. Some plants may bloom as soon as 8 months. Others have taken over 2 years. There is nothing you can do but wait patiently to see if you have produced an outstanding bloom or just another run of the mill hibiscus.

Q. About what percentage of the seeds planted will produce good new bloom.

A. That is hard to answer. Some batches of seed will produce no good new blooms. From other batches of seed you might get several outstanding new varieties. As an overall average I would say that not more than 4% of seedlings would be worth propagating. Some plants have poor growing habits and others have to be discarded because they are poor bloomers. Some of the new blooms are very near to another variety that is already known, so would not be worth registering as a new variety. So don't be disappointed with your first batch of seedlings...Try...Try...Again.